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## Wolterstorff, UNDERSTANDING LIBERAL DEMOCRACY: ESSAYS IN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

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*Understanding Liberal Democracy: Essays in Political Philosophy*, by Nicholas Wolterstorff. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 385 pages. \$65 (hard-cover).

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Nicholas Wolterstorff is best known for his contributions to metaphysics, aesthetics, the history of philosophy and, in particular, epistemology, philosophy of religion and the public role of religion in social life. And yet somehow he has managed, after a long career, to write a strikingly original and comprehensive set of essays in classical political philosophy. *Understanding Liberal Democracy* is remarkable in a number of ways. First, it provides the most comprehensive and in-depth criticism of public reason liberalism available in print. Second, it advances an original neo-Kuyperian political philosophy that has yet to appear in analytic philosophy. Third, it unifies much of Wolterstorff's writings on the role of religion in politics. And, finally, it offers a variety of original arguments about how to ground human rights. In this review, I begin with an overview of the book. I then turn to criticize Wolterstorff's attractive, if ultimately implausible, argument for a "protectionist" Christian defense of the right of religious freedom.

*Understanding Liberal Democracy* is divided into four broad parts. Part One, "Public Reason Liberalism," contains Wolterstorff's extensive criticism of public reason approaches to politics. Public reason liberalism is a theory of the permissible use of state coercion and its authority to coerce. The view holds, roughly, that state coercion is justified or authoritative when the law on which the coercion is based is publicly justified, or justified to all reasonable points of view. A problem that Wolterstorff points out, and that has received attention from a number of others, is that justification to persons is in fact justification to *idealized* persons. Wolterstorff's concern, in short, is that I cannot permissibly be coerced based on what my idealized counterpart accepts (40). Wolterstorff also offers an original critique of Gerald Gaus's version of public reason advanced in *Justificatory Liberalism*, critiquing Gaus's "moral demand" argument on several grounds, including that it too appeals to idealization (74). I think Gaus's more developed theory of idealization and its connection to moral demands advanced in *The Order of Public Reason* answers some of Wolterstorff's concerns, but I do not have the space to explain that here.

Part Two, "Re-Thinking Liberal Democracy," contains two essays which cover explanations of authoritative government decision-making and citizens' duties within liberal democracies. Wolterstorff thinks that the "governing idea" of liberal democracy is that of equal political voice plus

constitutional protection for natural rights (125). The most equitable and attractive theory of liberal democracy is one that accords persons equal political voice in the form of voting rights and public discussion. Citizens are obliged to sincerely offer their reasons for their political decisions to others and listen to other citizens do the same. Importantly, they are not required to censor their own views in any way beyond basic norms of civility, including their religious views (147).

Part Three, "Perspectives on Rights," further develops Wolterstorff's critique of secular attempts to ground human rights and advances a revised theistic grounding of human rights from the account advanced in *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*. Wolterstorff also defends the claim that people have a right to a democratic state and gives a theistic account of the political authority that compliments the view he develops in *The Mighty and the Almighty*. Part Four, "Liberal Democracy and Religion," reviews and updates Wolterstorff's unique approach to religious contributions to politics and also argues that Christians have good theological reasons to support liberal democracy and the right to freedom of religious exercise (chapters 9 and 12 respectively), among other things.

I have defended public reason views in several venues and I have affirmed many of Wolterstorff's criticisms while arguing that they give us reason to endorse a "convergence" interpretation of public reason rather than a consensus view. But I will not address Wolterstorff's criticisms of convergence here (105–108). Instead, I think we should turn to a matter of much greater interest to *Faith and Philosophy* readers, namely whether Wolterstorff has provided an adequate argument that Christians have good reason to support liberal democracy. *Faith and Philosophy* readers probably all endorse the political institutions of liberal democracy, and have some interest as to whether religious citizens have any significant reason to do so. Readers may rightly wonder whether citizens of faith, especially Christians, can accept the present political order in the economically advanced nations wholeheartedly or whether they must grudgingly go along with it.

Wolterstorff rightly points out that while many Christians look to St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas with reverence on philosophical matters, they cannot do so with respect to freedom of religion, one of the cardinal freedoms of liberal democracies (316–319). Augustine and Aquinas were, at times, serious opponents of freedom of religion. And Wolterstorff correctly argues that this opposition was due to their "perfectionist" understanding of politics, where it is the job of political order to promote a Christian conception of the good. Wolterstorff notes that Christians have largely, though not entirely, moved from a "perfectionist" understanding of politics to a "protectionist" view, where it is the job of political order to respect our human or natural rights (135). Wolterstorff thinks the protectionist view flows from Christians' increasing recognition of the worth of individuals, worth that they receive from being the objects of God's love and honor (197–198). But unfortunately Wolterstorff does not explain

whether the turn from Christian perfectionism to Christian protectionism is justified.

To see why, let's consider some axiological points. Suppose that, objectively speaking, the God-given worth of individuals provides weighty reasons to respect individual rights, including the right to freedom of religious belief and expression. But suppose further that Christianity is indeed true, such that there are *very* strong reasons to promote Christianity, as Christian belief is a (if not *the*) clear, reliable path to eternal friendship with God. If so, it may appear that we have conflicting reasons: (i) reasons to respect the worth of persons by respecting their religious choices and (ii) reasons to do whatever we can to ensure that people come to Christian belief. In this way, we're sensitive to *both* the moral reasons of "worth" celebrated by modern Christian protectionists like Wolterstorff and the moral reasons of "Christian goodness" celebrated by medieval Christian perfectionists like Augustine and Aquinas.

But now we are faced with two critical questions: which reasons are weightier? And why? I think any modern Christian will accept that there *are* protectionist reasons based in the worth of persons. But why should we think these reasons are sufficiently weighty to outweigh moral reasons of Christian goodness? After all, *salvation might be on the line*.

There is a reason why Christians have taken so long to recognize an intrinsic right of religious freedom: they were concerned with the eternal salvation of humanity, and thought themselves entitled to do what they could to bring it about. I believe they would find incredible the idea that reasons of worth give us reason to respect *mistaken religious choices*. Wolterstorff rightly points out that states really can affect beliefs over time, in contrast to Locke's well-known view (319). So why shouldn't a Christian state do what it can to ensure that children learn true doctrine, even if this includes restrictions on freedom of religion?

One answer, suggested by Wolterstorff in conversation, is that reasons of worth generate obligations, whereas reasons of Christian goodness do not. And given the nature of obligation, we likely lack reason to ignore that obligation in order to promote Christian goodness. This is because violating the right of religious freedom is *wrong* and we should not do what is wrong. However, it makes sense to ask whether we have sufficient reason to do the wrong thing in some cases. Sometimes, perhaps, weighty reasons of beneficence give us sufficient reason to be unjust.

If I'm right, the only way to justify a right of religious freedom from a Christian perspective is to show that reasons of worth outweigh moral reasons of Christian goodness. But that's a tall order given that the moral reasons of Christian goodness are reasons to promote *infinite goods*, the goods of knowing God eternally. How could *any* reasons of worth outweigh reasons to promote goods of infinite weight? Wolterstorff has not provided an adequate answer. Consequently, he has not shown that Christians have good reason to support religious freedom, and so that Christians have good reason to endorse one of the central planks of liberal

democracy. The question of the weight of reasons of worth, then, is central to Wolterstorff's project in *Understanding Liberal Democracy*, and one that has not been sufficiently addressed.

I cannot defend an answer of my own here. But here's a thought. Christians have always attached a great deal of weight to the importance of human free will in explaining the presence of great evil and suffering in the world. That is, Christians already think that God regards human free will as sufficiently precious to outweigh ending evil and simply "brainwashing" us to have good motives and right beliefs. Perhaps this indicates that we have similar reasons to respect the free choices of individuals.

An obvious worry follows: God allows people to do all kinds of wicked things, and we surely don't have reason to do the same. Christians think God has sufficient reason to allow Holocausts, but that humans surely have sufficient reason to use whatever coercive power we have to stop it. So why not think that, while God has reason to allow damnation, we must use whatever coercive power we have to stop it?

Reflection on the *reasons* God might allow damnation may point the way forward. In her new book on the problem of evil, *Wandering in Darkness*, Eleonore Stump argues that God allows evil in part to produce a complete relationship with human beings, united in goodness. Perhaps our reason to respect freedom is that we can only achieve the sort of unity we wish to have with others and God eternally if we allow others to reject us, and the True Church. The use of force cannot produce genuine unity, as it would merely displace their will with ours. I suggest then that Christians are *already committed* to holding that God has sufficient reason to allow damnation, an infinite loss, in order to respect freedom. If so, perhaps Christians have reason to allow similar losses in respecting an institutionalized right of religious freedom.

I find the problem of Christian toleration both fascinating and disturbing. I am grateful to Wolterstorff for helping to bring this critical problem into focus and providing at least part of the answer.

*Gratuitous Suffering and the Problem of Evil: A Comprehensive Introduction*, by Bryan Frances. New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2013. Viii + 196 pages. \$39.95 (paperback).

KENNETH BOYCE, University of Missouri—Columbia

According to its back cover, this book promises to deliver a "lucid and jargon-free analysis of a variety of possible responses to the problem of gratuitous suffering." It is also advertised as being "the perfect size and